

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: June 23, 2008

From :  Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 10(e): Consideration of resolution authorizing an augmentation to SMM-0752, Vista Hermosa Park, Los Angeles.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution authorizing an augmentation in the amount of \$400,000 to SMM-0752 for Vista Hermosa Park.

Legislative Authority: Sections 33204.27 and 75050(g)(2) of the Public Resources Code.

Background: The Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84) allocated funds to the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy in Section 75050(g)(2) of the Public Resources Code, for the protection and restoration of rivers, lakes and streams, their watersheds and associated land, water and other natural resources and the implementation of watershed protection activities throughout the watershed of the Upper Los Angeles River pursuant to Section 79508 of the Water Code.

Section 33204.27 of the Public Resources Code authorizes grants to local agencies for any of the purposes for which the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations under section 33204.2. Section 33204.2 authorizes the Conservancy to make grants to nonprofit organizations “to carry out improvements, maintenance, acquisitions, or educational interpretation programs that directly relate to a project that the conservancy is otherwise authorized to undertake pursuant to this division.”

On July 9, 2007, the Conservancy authorized a grant of Proposition 84 funds in the amount of \$508,823 to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) for the Vista Hermosa Watershed Park project. On May 12, 2008, the Conservancy augmented that grant with Proposition 84 funds in the amount of \$750,000 to reinstate certain additive alternate design features that been removed from the project for value engineering (read “budget-cutting”) purposes.

Rationale for the current request: The MRCA board on June 20, 2008 voted to approve the grant request previously submitted by the Authority’s chairperson. Three factors are at work here and militate in favor of approving this request:

(1) Mayor's Office Augmentation of Community Development Block Grant. Mayor Villaraigosa's Office has proposed augmenting the previously approved \$400,000 CDBG for the soccer field by an additional \$250,000. This money would back-out an equivalent amount of Prop. 12 that the Conservancy has previously spent. Unfortunately we cannot immediately gain access to the "freed-up" Prop. 12 money because the Conservancy does not have a current Prop. 12 appropriation from which to bill (the Conservancy's last Prop. 12 appropriation expired June 30, 2007). Therefore to actually utilize the additional city money on this project will require a Prop. 84 grant, which money would in turn would be fungible from Prop. 12 when that appropriation becomes available in FY 2009/10. While the Conservancy is not legally obligated to use the additional \$250,000 at Vista Hermosa, it is implicit in the Mayor's action that the extra block grant funds will benefit the non-soccer portions of the park.

(2) Planting and design plans should reflect appropriate interpretative themes in light of the intended inner-city audience. For both heuristic and cost-cutting reasons, MRCA's consultants and internal design staff made decisions about the planting plan that reflect a dry arroyo and typical southern California perennial native grassland regime. Renderings of the project, to be fair, did show typical (say) March or April grass and flower displays: green and colorful. However, the reality is that huge areas of the park were to be hydro-seeded only, and that for most of the year (May through mid-December) what the park visitor would actually see was dry, brown grass, probably interspersed with invasive exotics (read "weeds"). Whatever legitimacy there may be to the reintroduction of this pre-European settlement landscape in other contexts, in 21st Century downtown Los Angeles, there is a real risk that notwithstanding the most strenuous environmental education efforts, the affected community would consider the lack of a "green park" to reflect less ecological authenticity than disrespect and neglect. The planting plan that MRCA now proposes envisions a generally native plant community with a year-round "green" image, and the replacement of the dry arroyo with a recirculating water feature. As the grantee's staff describes it:

The park has been met with unqualified support and enthusiasm, and it is apparent that the demand for active use areas and shaded gatherings is higher than originally thought. To meet this demand, MRCA proposes to modify the planting, irrigation, and pathway design in several areas to allow for larger, better distributed, shaded and configured play and gathering areas that will not conflict with other uses and the more fragile native plant restoration areas. More large trees are necessary to achieve any shade in the short term.

(3) The contractor is seriously behind schedule and additional labor is required. The contractor is three months behind. As one might expect, the contractor and MRCA disagree on

Agenda Item 10(e)

June 23, 2008

Page 3

the cause of the delay, but what is clear is that the revised completion date of July 17th, a scant two days before the dedication and opening, represents a woefully inadequate margin of safety on a project of this size. The Authority's proposal would bring in the Los Angeles Conservation Corps and if that source is insufficient, then additional private contractors that MRCA has used in the past, in order to complete the planting on time.